

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 9A

BALTIMORE SUN
1 October 1984

Don't Blame Me

Kitchen Remodelling and Other Excuses

Chicago.

WE HAVE just seen why the president's keepers wave off questions, curtail press sessions and simply refuse to call press conferences. Given a serious matter to talk about, Ronald Reagan will — under questioning — say things silly or false or both.

The serious matter was the death of Americans in Lebanon

By Garry Wills

who were under his care and were not protected, despite ample advance warning that they were targets. The president's first remark was to claim that anyone who remodels a kitchen knows it is hard to get the task finished on time.

What would we say of his own Secret Service protectors if they left the president's life exposed, and afterward adopted the kitchen-remodeling defense? The mere likening of their task to such a casual effort, with its incidental annoyances, would show they had no worthy conception of their duty.

Is the president less duty-bound to protect citizens he has committed to a dangerous situation than are the guards who surround him? Other lives become kitchen appliances to a man who had already lost, prior to this last bombing, 276 American lives in combat areas. When does he begin to realize that a battle zone is not a leaking faucet?

The president's next comment on the matter was even worse. The reporters were sealed off from him, but a college student got to him with a question, and he said that American lives were lost because his predecessors of "recent years" were guilty of "destruction of our intelligence capacity" because they felt that "spying is somehow dishonest."

Where does one begin to analyze an assertion so breathtakingly false when it is not irrelevant?

Don't blame me, the president said; blame the nameless men who betrayed their high trust before I arrived. His aides went dreadingly about their customary task after he has slipped their controls — denying as much as they could of the statement, altering the rest, spreading its meaning, hoping to make it meaningless so no one would notice how McCarthyite the meaning of it is.

The argument was irrelevant because Mr. Reagan said it is the job of intelligence "to know in advance what the target might be." Everyone knew who the target was — not might be — in Lebanon. There was no failure of intelligence, just repeated failures of protection.

No one in authority ever acted on the view that "spying is dishonest." Some abuses were criticized, though only partly amended, as the result of a Republican administration's study under Gerald Ford. Some reduction of the CIA was made possible — indeed, necessary — by the ending of the Vietnam War.

But the destruction of the CIA is going forward now in ways that did not occur even under Richard Nixon. Nixon kept demanding from the CIA and FBI intelligence estimates that reflected his views rather than independent observation — for example, that demonstrations in America were being funded from abroad. The agencies resisted that pressure.

Mr. Reagan asserts the same thing Nixon did, with no better evidence, and pays no attention to the agencies on this matter. He has Mr. Casey to do that — who has driven out two top analysts already because they would not make their findings reflect a prior policy commitment emanating from the White House. Those are the pressures that undermine the independence, accuracy and efficacy of intelligence units; and they have never been stronger than under a man who, in cowardly manner, calls his predecessors the betrayers of their trust.